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Touching, Flirting, Whispering

Performing Intimacy in Public

Fintan Walsh



We want performance to seduce us, and in its own way, performance wants to seduce us. But what forms of intimacy do these circuits of desire model or deliver, and what might they reveal about intimacy on a wider level? I address these questions by considering three performances that pivot on relationships of touch, flirtation, and whispering—forms of intimate contact that slip into, and back on, one another: Scottish performer Adrian Howells’s *Foot Washing for the Sole* (2008); Belgian theatre company Ontroerend Goed’s *Internal* (2007); and German-British artist Tino Sehgal’s *These Associations* (2012). Participating in these structured encounters reveals

Figure 1. Adrian Howells, Foot Washing for the Sole. Tokyo Performing Arts Market, 2013. (Screenshot by TDR from <http://vimeo.com/18162606>; © TPAM)

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how the provision and pursuit of intimacy in public amounts to no simple pleasurable reward, but rather demands the navigation of a complex set of performance anxieties and labor pains. Accordingly, I examine how these works conspire to create intimate relationships with and among their publics, paying heed to their potential experiential, sociopolitical, and ethical virtues. I also consider how intimacy is sometimes performed under substantial pressures to feel or at least to fake it, especially when participants are faced with obligations to pay money and attention. As performance makers seem to have become more interested in curating intimacy in public, I wonder what this might reveal about more private intimacies, and public/private divides more generally. Are these, and similar works, important interventions into how people today experience social and political alienation; or perhaps more circumspectly still, are they representative of the displacement of intimate desire as personal and private, as it becomes increasingly choreographed and commodified in the neoliberal public sphere?

Promiscuous might be one way to describe these works, given that they draw freely on a range of artistic traditions, as I do myself, including performance art, experimental theatre, and interactive gallery installations. But we might also be struck by their seductive tendencies, exercised in the provocative reputations that often precede them, as well as during the live events themselves, which are bent on tempting would-be participants to come closer and join in. Insofar as the performances I focus on centralize interaction, they fall into the broad-brush categories variously described as relational, socially engaged, immersive, or participatory. So too might they be situated within a tradition of “neo-Aristotelian catharsis” (Walsh 2013:6, 72), a term I have used elsewhere to account for a swathe of contemporary work that centralizes confession, physical and emotional intimacy, and rich affectivity within its structures.¹ Despite such numerous possibilities for categorization, the examples I’m particularly interested in here are distinct in that they raise questions specifically about the physical, emotional, and affective boundaries between performers, participants, and spaces, in ways that have implications for how we think about the pains, pleasures, and politics of proximity on a wider level.

But what kind of intimacy might something as promiscuous as performance have to offer? Indeed, intimacy is often thought of as promiscuity’s nobler relative, the exclusive encounter we really seek among promiscuity’s many beds. Derived from the Latin *intimus*, meaning “within,” intimacy refers to both spatial and experiential relationships of closeness, achieved by connecting physical, emotional, and affective borders between people or places, even animals or things, drawing them into contact from what is presumed to be the estranging effect of distance and distinction. While intimacy was once considered to be the preserve of individuals, and especially couples, often in domestic spheres, in recent years it has become more of a public concern. Social and political theorists point to everything from the reconfiguration of the heteronormative family unit to the disaffecting effects of urbanization, globalization, and digital technology in an attempt to account for our search for intimate connection outside of obviously personal, private, or domestic arenas.² While intimacy has long been an implicit dramaturgical concern for performance (from Aristotelian catharsis to Brechtian estrangement, for example), it has increasingly become the core subject of inquiry, a shift that can be understood as both a symptom and a response to some of these broader cultural dynamics.

1. Maria Chatzichristodoulou and Rachel Zerihan associate the recent focus on intimacy in theatre and performance with a desire for human connection they trace to the turn of the new millennium, and the symbolic, social, and technological anxieties it heralded (2012:2). While this periodization is in many ways persuasive, of course the pursuit of intimacy in public is not all that new. For example, the concern over social alienation that troubled many Western philosophers and artists in the early and mid 20th century — Brecht’s theatre is exemplary — can be seen as the direct precursor to the contemporary fascination with intimacy, insofar as one presumes the other.

2. For a good overview of some of these debates see Sasha Roseneil and Shelley Budgeon’s “Cultures of Intimacy and Care beyond ‘the Family’: Personal Life and Social Change in the Early 21st Century” (2004).

Touching

Adrian Howells's *Foot Washing for the Sole*

Adrian Howells's practice is primarily concerned with mining boundaries between himself and participants, typically working with small groups or individuals in non-theatre spaces. For example, in *Salon Adrienne* (2005), performing as his crossed-dressed alter-ego Adrienne, Howells talked with members of the public in a functioning salon, while washing their hair and

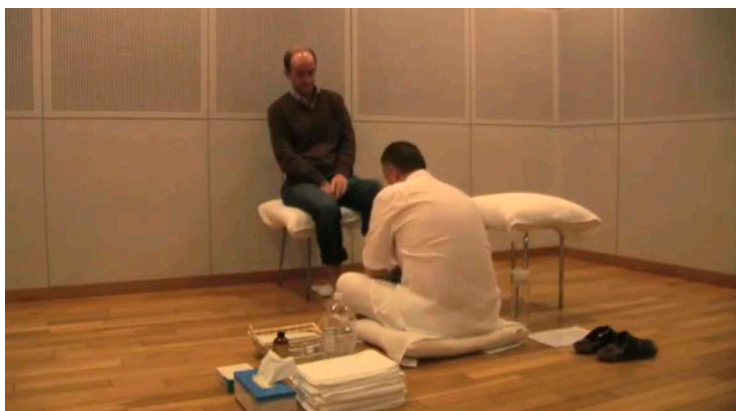


Figure 2. *Intimacy is experienced by both parties in Adrian Howells' Foot Washing for the Sole. Performing Arts Market, 2013. (Screenshot by TDR from <http://vimeo.com/18162606>; © TPAM)*

massaging their scalps, and in the one-on-one *The Pleasure of Being: Washing, Feeding, Holding* (2010), he bathed, fed, and embraced willing participants in a repurposed hotel suite.

Howells's approach draws heavily on therapeutic and religious practices of confession, while also raising interesting questions about the allure and labor of organized intimacy of this kind. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the television talk show became the mass-mediated apotheosis of this cultural interest in confession, in which self-analysis and disclosure are almost indistinguish-

able from the exploitative spectacularization of suffering, the production of (minor) celebrity, and the placation of spectators. This performance work both plays into and against this popular format. Additionally, at the heart of Howells's practice is what can be described as a haptic dramaturgy, in which he uses forms of physical touch to carefully engage participants. These are among the key features of *Foot Washing for the Sole*, which draws on Judeo-Christian ideas of service, cleansing, and absolution.

At the 2010 performance in a restored 16th-century tavern in Kilkenny, Ireland, an assistant led me from the waiting area on the ground floor to a spacious, well-lit room upstairs. I was greeted by an affable, softly spoken Howells, dressed in white. It was just the two of us. Howells asked me to remove my shoes by the door, and guided me to sit down. He told me what he was going to do during our time together, which would be just under half an hour. Then he led me in a calming slow breathing exercise: in, out, in, out, in out. Howells then began to bathe my feet.

As he did so, Howells told me about the research process that informed the practice. This involved visiting the Middle East where he learned about the Israel/Palestine conflict, which moved him towards creating the piece. He claimed to have been struck by the realization that the violence he discovered was in stark opposition to the historical Judeo-Christian practice of foot washing, which is predicated on a relationship of care and service. This dynamic, he emphasized, was not the same as servility. Howells asked me how I felt about my own feet. "I'm glad to have them," I said, "although I haven't really given them much thought." When he finished bathing my feet and anointing them with oil, he asked if he could kiss them. I agreed, out of a mixture of curiosity and duty.

What is intimate about this performance might seem obvious enough: individual participants are invited to expose a part of their bodies not normally given attention in public, especially in artistic or cultural contexts, and have them bathed, massaged, and then kissed. Howells

asked me to talk about how I felt about my feet, and to offer thoughts on forgiveness and service. He also invited me to breathe methodically, which in the company of just one stranger felt more intimate than talking. The performer's white clothes evoked a massage studio or beauty salon setting, his touch and its verbal justification a religious practice, and the appeal to my feelings and the parting kiss something more erotic still. At times these registers oscillated, with one seeming more pronounced than the others, but mostly they overlapped, held in balance by Howells's palpable sincerity. Of course, he too was exposed to these contingencies of contact, even though he was leading and ostensibly in control. As Deirdre Heddon suggests, this work pivots on "dual notions of transaction and transformation, with exchange anchored in the dialogic: the oral/aural, the spoken and the heard [...] and exchange that asks for a committed and at times vulnerable sort of spectatorship" (2011:1).

But despite the vulnerability to which this interaction exposed both of us, the performance took place within a carefully choreographed structure of actions that both enabled intimate contact and kept at bay the more obvious risks, such as either of us feeling exposed against our will, vulnerable, or even violated. Howells told me what would happen, and I trusted him; I behaved like a compliant "spectator." The model of nonhierarchical service that Howells verbally proposed may appear more ethically complicated when considered not just in terms of foot-washing, but rather in terms of foot-washing we pay for, so that any emotional or affective "transaction" is predicated upon monetary exchange. This may in many ways be an intimate experience, but it also takes place within an economy of service where we pay to be touched, and in turn may even feel an obligation to be touched (as with the kiss, despite Howells's gentle request), to feel or at least to appear moved; in other words, to *act*. In this one-on-one environment, the latter expectation is uniquely charged: we are not just here to see, think, and freely feel, but to work affectively. If we do not engage in this labor, the performance won't happen. We fail the performance, we fail Howells.

If we arrive with a specific kind of emotional fulfillment in mind, perhaps based on expectations of the performance whetted by the audience feedback book left in the waiting area, we may even feel short-changed. In particular, here we feel a compulsion to participate in what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri refer to as an economy of "immaterial labor" (2004:108), in which we must work to produce affect to carry the performance.³ As Erin Hurley has argued, an element of "feeling-labor" is particular to most theatre and performance activity, a term she uses to describe "the work theatre does in making, managing, and moving feeling in all its types (affect, emotions, moods, sensations) in a publicly observable display that is sold to an audience for a wage" (2010:9). This quality and expectation is heightened in the one-on-one scenario, so that what on the one hand seems like bodily care in Howells's practice is also an imperative to engage in the laborious production of affect to keep the show going; both Howells and I had to work to make feeling "happen," or at least to seem to.

In this the performance perhaps inadvertently reveals the complex affective-economic bind in which the desire for intimacy is experienced in the contemporary world: seeking it out publicly, we pay for it, we work for it, we even pay to work for it, and in this labyrinthine circuit there appears to be little difference between intimacy and industry. We might blithely deduce that intimacy, so frequently presumed to defy structure and organization, actually involves a lot of hard work. But in paying to experience it in public *as work*, we might both worry about the displacement of a more personal and private intimacy, which such a process seems to involve. However, we might also take heart at participants' readiness to support and sustain the performance event. After all, without someone willing to engage in this labor, the show would certainly not go on.

3. Hardt and Negri suggest that in the latter half of the 20th century, the hegemony of industrial labor gave way to that of immaterial labor, which was less invested in making tangible objects than "immaterial products such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response" (2004:208).

Flirting

Ontroerend Goed's *Internal*

Even though Howells's performance tests boundaries between himself and audiences, it does not rely on the participant's active physical contribution, as such. During my experience I mainly sat, and the most significant part of my work was affective. Further, there was no one else around to see, influence, or judge my behavior or Howells's. Ontroerend Goed's work, on the other hand, purposely manipulates relationships among participants and performers, pres-

sureing us to feel as close to and as uncomfortable with each other as possible. The centrality of affective exploration to the ensemble's work is captured in the Flemish name of the company, which roughly translates as "feel estate" (Bauwens in Radosavljević 2013:245).

Internal is part of a trio of works, *Personal Trilogy*, which also includes *The Smile Off Your Face* (2007) and *A Game of You* (2011). In each of these performances, the ensemble immerses audiences in often challenging physical, emotional, and affective situations. With *A Game of You* and *Internal* in particular, the group investigates the connection between the seductiveness of the immersive event as



Figure 3. Ontroerend Goed, *Internal*. Mercure Point Hotel, Edinburgh, 2009. Four participants line up with four company members. (Photo by Virginie Schreyen, courtesy of Ontroerend Goed)

the theatrical equivalent of talk shows or reality television, in which participants are encouraged and even duped into indiscriminately sharing personal information. In *Internal*, the company is especially concerned with the possibilities for, and problems with, the desire for intimacy among ostensible strangers, explored in the ambiguously positioned public/private space of theatrical performance.

What makes intimacy such an important and difficult area of inquiry is not just the measure of touchy-feely togetherness it promises or evokes, although that may well be justifiably part of it, but rather because it enables us to consider the various ways by which we are bound to each other and to the world; ties that may include the biological, legal, and political, as well as the more nebulous emotional, affective, and social kind. At best intimacy can promote support, sustenance, and responsibility; at worst narcissism, claustrophobia, and individualism. Despite our best efforts, or maybe even because of them, intimacy is not a given, nor is it necessarily easy to achieve. Its pursuit is undergirded by the fear that contact will not happen, that too much will, that relationships will break down. In different ways, these are among the complex desires and often contradictory anxieties aroused and examined by *Internal*, and indeed across Ontroerend Goed's work more generally. The production notes signal this terrain by outlining the performance's guiding question: "What if we would look for internal information of the visitors, personal stuff, private thoughts and feelings? [...] We investigate the possibility of a meaningful relationship with a stranger, and how this can be translated to a theatrical setting" (Ontroerend Goed 2014).

Before I attended the 2010 performance in the Smock Alley Theatre, Dublin, all I knew about the company was that it had developed a reputation on the European theatre circuit for

offering interactive, difficult, and even exploitative experiences. This forewarning was communicated by reviewers who tended not to reveal the core content of the company's work, in order to preserve mystery. So like many other Ontroerend Goed audience members, I was primarily chasing a new experience, possibly even a risky, uncomfortable one. The 25-minute piece began with me standing shoulder-to-shoulder with four other participants, facing a black curtain. The curtain opened, and we were each faced by a member of the company. They looked at us intently, up and down, obviously judging. Then the four reshuffled, before finally each company member committed to one participant. I was selected by Maria, but I did not know the criteria nor the purpose.

Maria led me to a booth in the corner of the dimly lit black box space. She poured me a shot of vodka, told me a little bit about herself, and inquired about my interests and values, whether or not I believed in love at first sight. She asked me to imagine that we were in a special place together, wondering what we were doing, if we were kissing or not. She was flirting with me, and face-to-face in this environment, it was hard not to play along, if only to please her. I did not mention being gay because I sensed this would throw her off course; she was trying to be personal and spontaneous, but clearly there was a script. In this urge to share and support the performance event, I was arguably working harder than Maria, so that whatever intimacy was being generated here was not only the fruit of her acting but my compulsory labor. Maria affected genuine interest, asking if we could be friends after the performance. Even though I knew it was a device, the physical intimacy of the encounter, her eye contact, the alcohol, the sense of novelty, and the seemingly personal anecdotes made it very difficult not to share something, too. What this was I cannot remember. I may have just made something up.

After about 10 minutes, the conversation with Maria ended and everyone was brought to the center of the room where we sat in a circle, as if at a group counseling session. (Later, I found out from the company that each performer had a defined role: while Maria was “the female seducer,” others included “the negative one,” “the silent one,” “the one with criteria,” and “the male seducer.”) In turn, the performers disclosed information they discovered about each of the participants during our “closed” discussions, prompting us to do the same. Steadily, they began to deride the intimacy they cultivated by adding or embellishing details, or trying to embarrass us. Maria mocked me for appearing stiff, and another female performer flashed her breasts in a male participant's face, shouting that they were all he was interested in throughout their

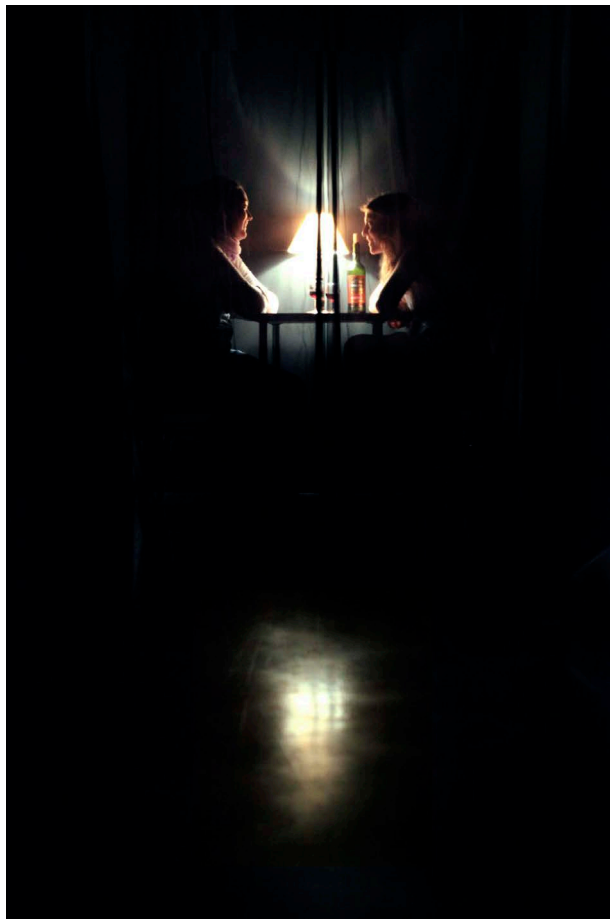


Figure 4. Ontroerend Goed, Internal. Mercure Point Hotel, Edinburgh, 2009. Flirting, face to face. (Photo by Aaron de Keyzer, courtesy of Ontroerend Goed)

conversation. Maria Chatzichristodoulou and Rachel Zerihan claim that “intimacy in performance relocates registers of affect from the public sphere to the private experience, triggering a multitude of questions around the nature, form and effect of performance studies and practice” (2012:1). If this piece began with the performers appearing to try to get closer to us, by initially relocating affect from public exposure to private intimacy, then that readiness was ruthlessly undermined at the end, and the intimacy of the couple was sacrificed for the pleasure of the group, and arguably the moral satisfaction of the theatre company itself. Insofar as the crux of the performance was the company’s rejection of our desire to share or be close to them, it felt like they always came out on top. The desire to experience intimacy in public was derided as narcissistic, and its ostensible production was exposed as an effect of theatrical labor, a burden that the performers were unwilling to bear alone.

In her book *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, Eva Illouz argues that we live in a time where emotional and economic discourses shape each other, so much so that “affect is made an essential aspect of economic behavior and in which emotional life—especially that of the middle classes—follows the logic of economic relations and exchange” (2007:5). In this

view, the work of feeling and the production of capital are almost inseparable. While performers and performance-makers are no strangers to the task of trying to make audiences feel that they are a part of an event, or to dealing with that expectation, in this context the naturalized understanding of theatre as an intimate machine that works *for us*, the would-be coolly detached spectators, is powerfully countered. We leave thinking, and feeling, that intimacy cannot be easily purchased or exchanged.

A few weeks after attending *Internal* I received a letter from Maria telling me that she genuinely felt we had a connection. Others received photographs. It was another strategy to draw me back in again, a further test of my willingness to confess and invest. I did not write back, though many do: the company retains these documents and even

includes them in shows. I remembered seeing a wall of letters from other participants as I left my encounter, and made the connection. So the ensemble extends the question of the possibilities for intimacy with strangers beyond the immediate performance space, but more than this, plays with the audience’s unrelenting self-absorption. In the *Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett sees the flooding of the public sphere with intimate concern as the central mark of a sociopolitically debilitating narcissism. The testing of one another’s self-interest, he suggests, is one manifestation of this, and it is a practice that mirrors market logic:

In a society where intimate feeling is an all-purpose standard of reality, experience is organized in two forms which lead to this unintended destructiveness. In such a society, the basic human energies of narcissism are so mobilized that they enter systematically and perversely into human relationships. In such a society, the test of whether people are being authentic and “straight” with each other is a peculiar standard of market exchange and intimate relations. (Sennett 1977:8)

Ontroerend Goed’s work, like Howells’s, harnesses our desire to explore or experience intimacy in public, but provocatively subverts that ambition. The company blatantly works us so that we experience this desire as a problem to be wary of or even ashamed about, reproaching

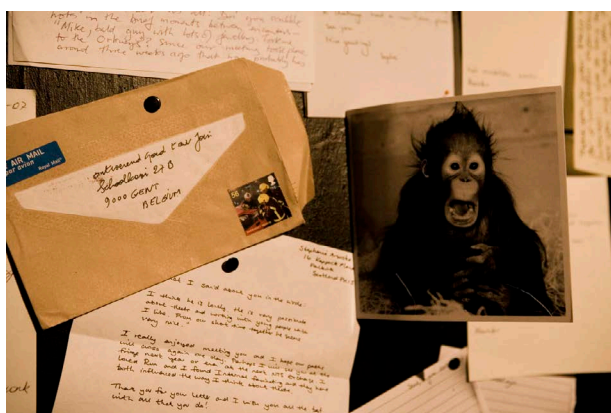


Figure 5. *Ontroerend Goed, Internal*. Mercure Point Hotel, Edinburgh, 2009. Follow-up letters with participants extend the possibility for intimacy. (Photo by Aaron de Keyser, courtesy of Ontroerend Goed)

us affectively for wanting it in the first instance. The wall of reply letters outside each performance quite literally makes an exhibition of the public's desire for intimacy, and the company's spectacular frustration of that desire.

Whispering

Tino Sehgal's *These Associations*

Tino Sehgal works within a visual and conceptual artistic tradition, with most of his performance pieces taking place in museums and art galleries. Sehgal is perhaps best known for creating what might be best described as interactive situations in these environments, in which a typically non-paying public (though obviously many of these institutions are state funded) is exposed to choreographed encounters that invite reflection on our relationships to other people and artistic spaces in urban environments. In the early *This Is So Contemporary* (2005), for example, first performed at the Venice Biennale, museum guards suddenly broke into joyful song and dance, and in *This Progress* (2010), staged at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral gallery was emptied of artwork, and visitors are led up the staircase by an intergenerational cast of guides, who asked participants what they thought about the idea of progress.

In London, in 2012, *These Associations*, was programmed in the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall—a five-story-high concrete commissioning venue, with 3300 square meters of floor space. The piece was made with paid volunteers rather than professional performers, who worked with Sehgal over the course of a year to create a variety of seemingly spontaneous situations within the large hall. Owing to its ground-floor location, this is an area people often pass when absentmindedly entering or exiting the building, or when visiting the gallery shop.

When I first encountered *These Associations*, the space was dotted with what looked like an incidental, ambling group of people. Moments later, divisions emerged, and small groups formed and moved up and down the hall, one minute fast, the next slow. Collectively, they whispered barely audible comments—I caught the rapid repetition of “electricity”—and some individuals fell off from their groups to speak to visitors (whether they were here to experience the performance intentionally or accidentally, I do not know). A middle-aged man walked towards me and remarked on how busy London was, that we never had time to ourselves, that we should change this. He was off before I had a chance to reply, swept up again by verve of the group. Other visitors reported hearing different stories, mainly about our relationships to cities. For instance, critic Travis Riley reports someone saying to him, “I belong to New York City, now it's time to go somewhere else” (Riley 2012). The lights flickered and dimmed as a young woman paused next to me. She mumbled quietly, standing on the spot, as if anchored by her



Figure 6. Tino Sehgal, *These Associations*. Tate Modern, London, 2012. Paid volunteers walk slowly and silently down the installation space. (Photo by Chris Cannam)



Figure 7. Tino Sehgal, *These Associations*. Tate Modern, London, 2012. Small groups formed and moved up and down the hall, one minute fast, the next slow. (Photo by Phil Rogers; Creative Commons)

own thoughts. The lights rose and she too was off. Suddenly, all the performers were drawn back into the center of the hall, chatting and clambering, before splitting up again as if nothing special was happening.

Unlike the one-on-one organization of Howells's piece, or the dating/group therapy format of *Ontroerend Goed*'s show, here the performers moved like a murmur of starlings: suddenly swelling up, now almost perfectly synchronized, then dissembling and falling away. These formations might even be seen to evoke the shape and rhythm of daily urban life, as people rise to take over the main thoroughfares before dropping away again, out of clear sight. And while the performers did not insist on our active participation, or expose us to the awkwardness of forced intimacy, we inevitably were shifted around by their movements: seeing more of them from different vantage points, bumping into other knowing visitors and unwitting passersby, all the while discovering the expansive space.

Writing about *These Associations*, Claire Bishop argues that because of the way it is so carefully structured, "we have no choice but to participate" (Bishop 2012). My response to this piece, particularly when compared with the other performances I discuss here, was exactly the opposite: that we could take it or leave it. Whereas in the city we are frequently too physically close to each other to feel emotionally so, this performative situation modeled contact and even offered it, while making room for disinterest, refusal, or a quick exit. Compared to the other performances considered, there is less compulsion on the part of spectators to bend to the format—we neither have to pay money (at least not directly) nor attention. In its aesthetic looseness it seems to propose intimacy as a mobile form of attachment, which is neither driven towards closure nor commodification. Featuring no tangible art object as such, within the Tate space Sehgal's piece also functioned to ironize the economic relations that would otherwise make us feel utterly separate from expensively priced visual art in particular.

Wandering around the Turbine hall, straining to connect with people and art, the ghosts of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx never felt far behind. They are, of course, among the most

important thinkers to shape our understanding of the intimacy/alienation bind in the past century. Freud understood alienation as a foundational effect of socialization, in which subjectivity is divided into conscious and unconscious realms, leaving us to (think we) desire what (we think) we do not have, so much so that we seek out other people and things to fill our sense of lack.⁴ And Marx considered alienation as an effect of capitalism, under which workers depend on labor for money to live, but in so doing only survive as workers, separated from the products of work, from working, from themselves, and ultimately from other workers. For workers, according to Marx, capitalism is an essentially alienating social bond, and one which propels us towards commodity fetishism.⁵ Having us pursue people as art, or art as people, it feels like Sehgal wants us to experience and reflect upon these complex spaces of desire too, but in a playful rather than punishing way.

Lauren Berlant expresses concern that intimacy gets too easily normalized by its association with the state, institutions, and public ideals, and argues that “[w]hile the fantasies associated with intimacy usually end up occupying the space of convention, in practice the drive toward it is a kind of wild thing that is not necessarily organized that way, or any way” (1998:285). While Sehgal’s performance situation can hardly be seen to stage anything comparable to a sustained social support system or solidarity, I think it finds a place for public intimacy in its modeling of the pleasures of fluid, even fleeting attachment—close enough to others, close enough to art—prompting us to think afresh about the contact we already make and want.⁶

Dispersive Performance

Intimacy’s After Effects

One of the features I find most interesting about Sehgal’s performance encounter is that its emphasis is more on dispersal than immersion: the goings as well as the comings that undergird intimacy, and the impossibility of ever fixing the “moment” of contact. (Of course, one could leave the other performances too, but the opportunity is not built-in.) In this, Sehgal’s piece seems like an interesting antidote to the contemporary surge in immersive art practices. His choreography of real and symbolic spaces suggests to me the value of not trying to labor intimacy too much, nor forcefully closing the distance between us. Sehgal’s theatre of proxemics puts me in mind of Slavoj Žižek’s claim that one of the effects of globalization and population growth is that the prevalent attitude of “understanding-each-other” is supplemented by the imperative of “getting-out-of-each-other’s-way” or “maintaining an appropriate distance” (2006). Žižek argues that efforts to know our neighbors better are couched in the expectation that we should not know them too well; that others retain an element of the radically different and unknowable that might destroy us. This insight usefully alerts us to the possibility that contemporary desires for intimacy in public might not only be symptomatic of a globalizing world, in which population expansion effects the compression of physical space, particularly in cities; but that the impulse is supported and protected by the even more powerful desire to avoid getting too close, so much so that alienation is very much interwoven into the intimate textures of the social sphere.

Contrary to Jacques Derrida’s championing of hospitality as radical openness to others (see Derrida in Kearney and Dooley 1999), Žižek suggests that a certain caution in this regard might

4. See, for example, Freud’s writings on the Oedipus complex in *The Standard Edition* (2001).

5. On this see Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, particularly the section on “Estranged Labour” ([1967] 2007:67–83).

6. In this “close enough” model of intimacy, I think of D.W. Winnicott’s idea of the “good enough” mother who is effective in her ordinary, moderate provision of care (1991: esp. 1–34). There is something in the idea of enoughness that seems to usefully illuminate and warn against the dangers of too much or too little intimacy.

be crucial to society's ethico-political stability: "Sometimes, a dose of alienation is indispensable for the peaceful coexistence of ways of life. Sometimes, alienation is not a problem but a solution: globalization will turn explosive not if we remain isolated of each other, but, on the opposite, if we get too close to each other" (2006). This perspective chimes with Sennett's assertion that a public realm organized around intimate, personal desire will inevitably be thwarted by the idiosyncratic impulses of selfhood: "because every self is in some measure a cabinet of horrors, civilized relations between selves can only proceed to the extent that nasty little secrets of desire, greed, or envy are kept locked up" (1977:5).

We could speculate that the desire I have tracked here reflects a waning of intimacy in the private sphere, or just a curiosity to sample the frisson of new forms of social encounter in public. We might even doubt that a clear-cut private/public distinction any longer still holds. These performances may also be seen to explore what Sennett identifies as the burning question of how we "create a public realm in which people will tolerate being stimulated by the other" (2000:387). But while the practices I have drawn into conversation may well respond to a genuine desire for intimacy, and offer their own rehearsed and spontaneous rewards, in different ways they reroute our desire for intimacy back towards us, by making us work for it in the production of performance. Maybe performance was all we wanted all along. These encounters ultimately undermine (sometimes inadvertently) the idea that intimacy can be acquired as readily as money for goods or services. I emerge reminded that the performers or performances will not necessarily provide the kind of engagement I seek. Despite the personal thrust of this work, performance's awkward sociality insists that the intimacy ostensibly on offer cannot even remain private, or privatized, for very long. While Nicholas Ridout (2006) has argued that theatre's most powerful affects are produced in the (expected) failure of its attempt to represent affect, in these examples I sense that not only is the failure of intimacy not always expected, but that in its frustration we are pressed to rethink it as other than the effect of the purchase of contact with strangers in public.⁷ Instead, intimacy demands our labor, which performance solicits via practiced seduction, in order to generate and sustain itself. We may leave feeling a bit uncomfortable or cheated for having to engage in intimate work, or fulfilled for buoying the performance at hand. But we might also wonder about the possibilities for intimacy beyond what seems like a particularly capitalist system of exchange, in which intimacy often sounds and feels like just another word for alienation.

Postscript

Adrian Howells passed away during the production of this issue. He had an enormous impact on contemporary performance, particularly the work that is the focus of this article.

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7. I prefer the term "frustrate" here instead of failure, and have tended to use the word throughout this piece, insofar as I'm not sure what totally achieved or failed intimacy might be in this context. I suspect intimacy can only be experienced and understood as a relation in tension.

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